

Fictions of Old Age in Early Modern Literature and Culture

Nina Taunton

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To the memory of
my brother, my mother and my father
as always

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Prologue

The whirligig of time

At the end of *Twelfth Night*, Feste reveals to the assembled company the story of the gulling of Malvolio. He alone seems indifferent to the cruelty of the plot against Olivia's steward, considering it just recompense for an insult: 'I was one, sir, in this interlude, one Sir Topas, sir, but that's all one.' And then he throws Malvolio's words back in his face: 'But do you remember, 'Madam, why laugh you at such a barren rascal, and you smile not, he is gagged?' And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges' (5.1, 375–6). For Malvolio, the whirligig of time brought a short period of intense mental suffering and physical deprivation as punishment for dowsing the wit of the below-stairs revellers and for interrupting their loud and drunken partying. For the old, too, in the prescription and fictional literature of the early modern period, time's revenges meant an end to corporeal indulgence, and its depredations were ushered in via a deluge of printed matter on the need for the old to sublimate the weakening of the physical self by strengthening the mind and spirit. For early modern literature and culture, the Ages of Man schema, inherited from the middle ages and represented in print, painting and woodcut, showed how the whirligig of time finally brought the old back full circle to the helplessness of an infant, 'sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything' (*Works*, 1961, 2. 7, 166). Jacques' famous description of old age in *As You Like It* follows representations of the various stages of life by subdividing old age, alone of all the ages, into three distinct phases. The broad splitting of human life into three categories by Hippocrates, Aristotle and Galen — youth, maturity and age — was subsequently fine-tuned into Ages of Man *topoi* varying from three to twelve. Steven Smith, Mary Dove, Pat Thane and Aki Beam provide useful summaries of renaissance appropriation of ancient and medieval division of human life into seven (or more), four or three ages (Smith, 1976, 128–30; Dove, 1986, 10–19; Thane, 2001, 46–52; Beam, 2006, 98–102). Women were not included in this schema, since it was assumed that their lives followed the same pattern as men's, though speeded up. The onset of old age could thus be anywhere from the late forties to seventy for men but was accelerated by ten years in women. Notably, all of these representations of aging, whatever terminology they employ, create a separate category for

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old age, which alone of all the ages was regarded as a disease, and which contained its own distinctive regression.

Cultural historians have used a variety of materials including documentary sources, wills, diaries, censuses, records of provision for the elderly, prescription and imaginative literature to build up a picture of how society treated the old, and how the old perceived themselves. Given the relative paucity of documentary evidence, their reach is of necessity broad.¹ Whilst greatly indebted to works such as these, the aim of this book is to bring a variety of texts into relationships of meaning which depend on the use of one text as an interpretative tool which releases meaning in others. The book thus puts into operation a procedure which aims to bring about a textured and nuanced perception of old age in the period by cross-pollinating texts which sometimes belong to different and seemingly unrelated discursive and historical fields. So, for example, chapter 1 brings a range of dietary formulae to bear upon Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* as a means of drawing out its subtext on displacements of old age, and in chapter 2 early modern inheritance practices are marshalled as an interpretative key for bringing to light generic relationships of sameness and difference between Middleton and Rowley's tragicomedy *The Old Law* and the tragedy of *King Lear*. The book reappraises these key texts through different prisms. Both plays open up issues to do with the pragmatics of old age, just as ideas and practices open up the plays, and a major part of this book's remit is to tease out ways in which they are alike and unlike. It aims to bring to the fore their cultural significance through their relationship to a substantial body of material on the state's involvement in the process and effects of aging in addition to classically-derived ideologies. In the point and counterpoint of its discursive aim, therefore, the project takes advantage of a methodology favoured by literary scholars whose frame of reference is trans-linear and cross-historical and whose reach extends beyond the confines of new historicism and cultural materialism.

The overwhelming emphasis on stocking the mind did not discourage writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from attempts to devise extensive prescriptions for old age which would slow down the inexorable imprint of time's revenge upon the body. Though Bacon's treatise on the prolongation of life broke new ground, it was still one of a long line of such works going back to ancient the Greeks and Hebrews (cf. Gruman, 1966, 1-97). The physiologies of old age of Hippocrates, Aristotle and Galen collectively provided a narrative of inevitable decay, yet were at the same time accompanied by recommendations on how to delay the ravages of time. Cicero's *De senectute*, the chief source of inspiration for the compensatory benefits of senescence, relied upon such advice. His moralising of old age was, in turn, invoked wholesale by essayists, dramatists and his sixteenth-century expositors, though not always in the spirit in which the treatise was intended. The implications and outcomes of this fast-flowing stream of re-appropriation form a major strand of this book. In fiction and pre-

scription, the mind-body split when applied to old age reflects a profound ambivalence which is extensively researched, observed and explored in a variety of genres without ever attaining resolution. Representations of the aged condition in early modern literature and culture, till now an area of neglected scholarship because it is presumed not to bear features distinct from medieval concepts of old age, thrive on paradox. The contradictions found in every kind of text that is either centrally or peripherally to do with old age have wide-ranging implications for fictional representations which depended on received wisdom on aging, yet adapted this knowledge as a response to specific social pressures. It is the task of this study to examine unfamiliar examples taken from wills, testaments, meditations, legends, ancient and early modern idealisation, denigration and prescription together with literary re-workings and projections of age and aging, in order to give new readings of familiar texts, and first-time readings of those perhaps unfamiliar even to an informed scholarly readership, but which nonetheless bring into the critical arena preoccupations with and experiences of age. When subjected to intertextual and interdisciplinary analysis, this diverse body of writings, some of which are not normally associated with age at all and which are therefore absent from recent historical analysis, cast new light on themes of senescence which normally depend upon the requirements of genre but which also push generic boundaries to the limit.

Fictions of Old Age is designed to give readers a sense of the variety and depth of early modern thinking about old age. This multiplicity calls for fresh consideration, angled on age, of formulations of youth-age polemic, politics and gender which must also include the ways in which early modern writers in a range of genres shaped their classical sources. What assumptions and aims underwrite these (re)fashionings? What cultural significance may we attribute to ambiguous and contradictory images of old age, and to interest in the processes of aging that are either the primary subject matter or a significant subtext to so many different literatures? To what extent was there a premium on youth, and how was this counterbalanced by images of the authority of age in men? How can we account for the discrepancy between stage and non-fictional representations of the difference between old men and old women in the aging process, and in society's differential treatment of each? How can we evaluate these depictions alongside depictions of old age in genre art, family accounts and wills? These questions have wide-ranging implications for early modern fictional representations of old age, which both adopt and repudiate the stereotypical images handed down from the classics, and which give rise to the main argument of the book.

Simply put, the argument is that though society cast old men as figures of authority and the manuals taught that they should be revered, their manifestation in fiction and sometimes non-fiction is much more complex and fraught with ambiguity. Sometimes they appear as weakened in mind and

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body, lacking the respect of the younger generation, either humiliatingly dependent on their children or ridiculed for attempting to hide their age and weakness, sometimes as blocking figures (in drama particularly), unbending and formidable bastions of authority who must be challenged by the young. The trajectory for old women, however, is directly in reverse; ignored by society when old, ignored also by the manuals and cast by literature as hags, crones and witches, they nevertheless achieve an astonishing measure of freedom and independence denied to them during their childbearing years. Chapters 1 and 2 show how fictional writing variously re-works in different genres the commonplaces and stock characterisations of old age, while the two central chapters (3 and 4) on disgraceful old age interrogate the ways in which genre confronts gender contradictions.

Cicero's *De senectute* was used by the writers of ancient Rome and by a host of subsequent authors through the ages as an example of the honours and benefits of old age. Cicero wrote it when he was sixty-two; he dedicated it to Atticus, who was sixty-five, and he put it into the mouth of Cato the Elder, who was then eighty-three. Cicero wrote the treatise in exile from office and it is, for this reason, usually dismissed by present day historians of antiquity (in both senses) as a bid for re-employment, in much the same way as the question of continuing or re-employment of people over the retirement age splutters into life in current affairs programmes on BBC Radio 4.² The text was widely read from the moment it was written around 44 BC, and continued to be read from the twelfth century onwards. In particular, its wide dissemination in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, made possible by the invention of the printing press (and incidentally translated by its inventor, Caxton), informed humanist thought and both Protestant and Jesuit teaching. Erasmus, Luther and Montaigne all drew inspiration from its positive account of old age, and it was translated and published twice by Thomas Newton. Its place at the core of questions about age in politics and the politics of age make it, along with Plutarch's greatly indebted essay, 'Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Public Affairs' (1991, 75–153), a particular focus for the relevance of age-related matters in *Coriolanus* in chapter 5.

Cicero and, later, Plutarch, extol the virtues of elderliness in a bid to improve its status, and to show that men advanced in years continue to direct state affairs. Whatever his political objectives (he was writing just before the Ides of March, in the midst of great upheaval), Cicero's concern is manifestly to enhance the status of *senectus*, and to underscore its continuing importance in counsel. Following Cicero, both Thomas Newton and Francis Bacon are aware of the viability of old age. Yet their own work mutates into medical prescriptions on health and preservation of life which paradoxically imply and deny its value, and they recycle the negative images peddled by Horace, Aristophanes and above all Juvenal. Three-quarters of the way through a treatise that describes the best ways of enhancing and prolonging an old person's life, for example, Bacon inserts a section

on some of these negative stereotypes. He reproduces the opinion of 'an ingenious young Gentleman' from Poitiers, France' that if old men's minds were visible, they would be as deformed as their bodies; the mind's defects in age mirrored those of the body; old men's bodies were 'dry skinn'd, impudent, hard bowell'd, and unmercifull: bleare-ey'd, and envious; down-looking, and stooping, and Atheists; Earth, not Heaven, being their constant Object'; they had wobbly knees and trembling limbs, 'wavering, and unconstant;' their fingers were crooked, they were greedy and covetous, they were fearful, wrinkled and crafty (Bacon, 1638, 279–80). Physical imperfections mirror defects of character which to an extent amount to a breach in the decorum of old age itself, and seep into even the most knowledgeable and sympathetic accounts. This context for the Janus face of old age is the staple for chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Indeed, these two conflicting aspects of old age lie at the heart of the contradictions explored in this book. Bacon's *Historie of Life and Death. With Observations Naturall and Experimentall for the Prolonging of Life*³ presents a useful introduction to tension between positive and negative attitudes towards age and aging. He provides various strategies for halting the body's inevitable decay. He tells his reader that longevity can be achieved 'by safe, convenient, civill, but untryed new waies and meanes.' God willing, 'our shoos and the garments of our frail bodies' can 'be here little worne in our iourney in the worlds wilderness' (Bacon, 1638, *To the Reader*). Old age is a condition worth preserving, and by knowing how to prevent the body's decay, man is in position to fashion nature so as to slow down the whirligig of time and significantly delay its revenges on the body. In this, it shapes responses to health regimens for the elderly as an instrument for the interpretation of literary and dramatic texts. This 'angling' of one text as a conceptual key to other features operates particularly in chapters 1, 4 and 5. These chapters' aim is to demonstrate that the upbeat messages which culminate in the epilogue on its triumphs are paralleled at every turn by representations of grotesque, disgusting and corrupt old age.

The paradox of old age underpins this project's central tenet, which is that didactic literature's idealisations of masculine elderliness is a defensive strategy, and that the unsettling reality is exposed in works of fiction which undermine such rosy images and which promote an equally unsettling and transgressive image of old women, mostly forgotten in the manuals, as beings with an exuberant and alarming agency and purpose in life which galvanises the plotlines of comedy and tragedy. These contradictions give rise to interesting fictional and non-fictional representations of old age. Bacon, for example, co-mingles two current models of human science, the Galenic and the Paracelsan, with the result that his work on the prolongation of life, along with the works of fiction which this project examines, is shot through with ambiguity. His premise is that decay can be retarded and the body repaired, though unequally, for some parts of the body repair better than others: 'spirits, blood, flesh, and fatnesse are in the declining estate

of Age easily repaired; but there is much difficulty and danger in repairing the dry parts, [...] and all of the organically and instrumentally parts' (Bacon, 1638, 5). This ambivalence manifests itself in a variety of complicating ways and is examined particularly in 1, 3 and 5. In general, Bacon's work on aging mutates into varying positions of ambiguity in textualising the aged body that fall into the humanist trap of simultaneous dependence on classical authority and a desire to valorise the new science of observation and experimentation. This results in morally weighted but contradictory recommendations on how to ease the pains of old age. Shakespeare exposes this same ambivalence in his portrayal of Egeon and Adriana in *The Comedy of Errors* (chapter 1), and the two tribunes and Menenius in *Coriolanus* (chapter 5).

The arguments for the complexity of perceptions of and attitudes to old age in the early modern period are compelling, and undermine the thesis of Georges Minois' *History of Old Age* (Minois, 1989, 249). His claim is that in art and literature, attitudes to old age were simply ones of disgust:

The Renaissance, like every time of renewal and rebirth, celebrated youth, the fullness of life, beauty, and novelty. It abhorred everything that presaged decline, decrepitude, and death [...] the unprecedented violence of attacks against old age in the sixteenth century was derived from the impotent rage of a generation which worshipped youth and beauty.

He explains its ubiquity in literature as a morbid fascination because 'it formed the great obstacle to the deification of man, rendering it impossible' (249). Yet, by 'flagrant contradiction' (288), the old were everywhere in positions of esteemed authority in society, politics and the arts (288–301). It is true that each age has its own take on the process of aging, and its own culture-specific ideologies of old age. However, writers were interested in old age not only as a bipolar opposite of youth, but in its complex multiplicity which rendered images of old age confusing and until the most recent historical scholarship of, for example, Shulamith Shahar, Pat Thane and Lynn Botelho, only partially understood. The paradoxical nature of old age is taken for granted in most writings of the period, and stems in some part from the humanist impulse towards the text, textuality and its fondness for taxonomies; in other words, the rhetorical nature of experience, and, contradictorily, newly emerging ways of arriving at knowledge of the world direct, unmediated by the written word.

It is not surprising therefore that early modern writers, puzzling over how to prevent time enacting its revenges upon body and mind, drew heavily upon idealisations of old age which gave instructions to the ruling elite on how to ride the whirligig of time by valuing intellectual over physical vigour, and by fostering wisdom and respect as the dues of old age. Thomas Newton's preface to the *Worthye Booke of Old Age*, the first of his two translations of *De senectute*,⁴ exploits this connection and helps introduce

the process of textual cross-fertilisation that is the methodological linchpin of this book.

The first of Newton's translations, *The Worthye Booke of Old Age*, written when he was twenty-seven, was dedicated to William Paulet (1485–1572), First Marquis of Winchester and Lord Treasurer of England, who still held the reins of office at the age of ninety-three. Newton exploits his model, *De senectute*, by using the substance of the original as a means of advancing his own fortunes. Echoing the final part of Cicero's treatise which describes death at worst as mere oblivion, at best a gateway to eternal happiness, Newton ends his dedication with a hyperbolical flourish spun around a pun on translation and the metaphor of man as player upon the world's stage:

after the Epilogue and last Pageaunt of this mortal and transitorye lyfe (Wherin your Lordship with much worshippe, more honour, and most authoritye these lxxxxvi yeres hath ben a worthye and honourable Actor) you may be translated into the ioyes celestial, and be made partaker of his glorious kingdome (Newton, 1569, iv verso).

Textualising the aged body and ensuring its life everlasting through transmission of the written word by translation performs several useful functions for Newton. It allows him to accentuate the art and labour of the translator in his bid for patronage, while at the same time minimising the risk of offending with a work from his own pen. Translation, Newton's vehicle for immortalising the extraordinarily prolonged and continually active life of William Paulet, also permits, through an elaborate compliment, an identification of his would-be patron with the hero of the original text, Cato. In his dedication, Newton offers Paulet the 'gift' of his translation with an apt quote from Seneca, that a gift should 'haue a diligent eye and respecte' (Dedication, ii recto) for matter and argument to suit the recipient. As 'a fruitful and learned discourse of age' and wisdom in war and policy, it recommends itself particularly to Paulet's advanced years and high calling. He offers it as one 'in whom Old age to the great reioycing of al your welwillers most triumphantly flourisheth' (Dedication, ii verso). Thus Newton's translation ensures that the idealising rhetoric of old age in the original percolates into the politics of aging in his own day. By stressing the continuities of tenure in office and the enduring wisdom and authority of age with which he targets Paulet as a compellingly appropriate patron for a younger man, he forges links between Cicero, the sixty-year-old statesman writing to persuade senate to continue with his services, Cato, still in office at eighty-four-year, and Paulet, aged ninety-three (Newton adds on another three years), 'who is and longtime hath bene the principall husband of this famous Realm,' giving honourable and faithful service in 'manifold and waightye affayres at home and abroad' (Dedication, iii verso). This complex appropriation of text for specific social engineering is examined

further in chapter 2 which looks at the relationship of *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Old Law* and *King Lear* to a variety of texts, revealing their participation in the historical realities of inheritance.

In addition to its debt to the classics, the early modern period inherited from the middle ages types of behaviour and outlook expected of the old. Both eras grafted onto biblical example models of old age taken from the writers of antiquity, who treated it as a topic ripe for moral, political, religious and physiological instruction. Simon Goulart's *The Wise Vieillard*, Thomas Sheafe's *Vindiciae Senectutis, or, a plea for old-age* and John Smith's *Pourtract of Old Age*⁵ are just three examples of the many who leavened with personal experience the copious advice on morals and health found in ancient, medieval and biblical texts in order to outline and promote the notion of a comfortable old age. Borrowing the weighty sentiments of writings from these texts, early modern treatise writers set out to prepare their readers for the onset of the disease of senescence, and to teach them how to come to terms with its unavoidably terminal consequences. The assumption was that idealisations of masculine elderliness (from Cicero, Plutarch, Plato) and biblical examples of long lived helped those on the frontiers of old age to withstand its anticipated trials. But a hoary head and wrinkled visage were prime signifiers of conflicting messages; they were simultaneously markers of the enduring virtues of the wisdom and experience needed for a healthy politics of family and state, and of the inevitable physical and mental decay caused by loss of heat and 'radicall moisture' in the body (Bacon 1638: 3-4).⁶

The instruction literature on old age in the early modern period hinges on the premise that lapsed humanity cannot revert to the enviable condition of ancient and biblical long lived, yet those who are old have triumphed over time — that is, they have triumphed over life expectancy norms and have in consequence achieved an enviable proximity to the Almighty. Having survived war, illness and calamity, it behoves them to age gracefully. Pierre de la Primaudaye, whose full book title expounds his discursive aim,⁷ summarises types of behaviour and outlook expected of the old and favoured by the writers of antiquity. Cato's bequest to subsequent writers was his belief in self-regulation as the passport to a dignified and comfortable old age, despite its inherent 'deformities'. True authority emanates from a life lived in honesty and guided according to 'the best end of our being whereunto everie age is to be referred' (Primaudaye, 1589, 539). The treatise writers, in their desire to change the image of old age, sought to elevate it into a perfect condition achievable only through wisdom. Old age thus became a title and privilege conferred upon intellectual attainment and lifelong moderation in diet and exercise. But important as it was, nourishment of the mind and body was merely an adjunct to nourishment of the soul; intellectual strength counted for nothing if a man neglected or ignored his spiritual self. Both are inseparable, and indispensable as a means of counteracting the damaging effects of time: 'To such olde men as have their soules nour-

ished with heavenly light, old age is not grievous, and in such the desire of contemplation and knowledge increaseth as much as the pleasures of their bodie decrease.' (540). Such conceptualisations form the backdrop to this project's final section. Having explored representations of enfeebled old age, and in the opening chapter having uncovered textual displacements of the infirmities of age onto youth, *Fictions of Old Age* concludes by exploring projections onto the young of the qualities of age in Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*. In so doing it brings the work itself back round full circle to the image of the movement of time as a whirligig, but with the crucial difference that in some instances at least the changes wrought over time upon the body are not so much vengeful as transformative.